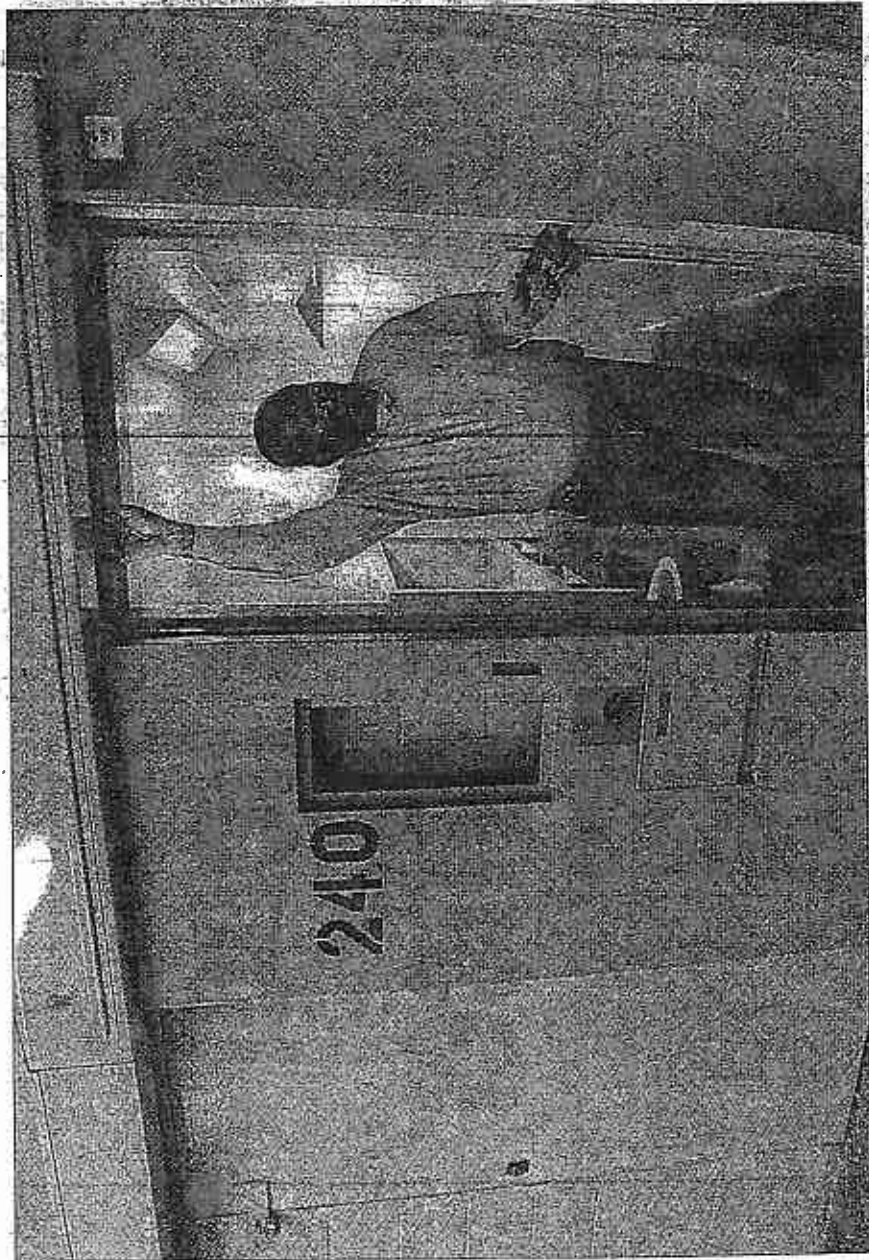


'Harrison County created a monster'



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM ISBELL/THE SUN HERALD

Harrison County Sheriff Melvin Brisolara shows how a sliding door's mechanism at the county jail is away from the prisoner, making it more difficult to damage the door.

Sheriff pushes for reforms at county jail

Jail

Continued from A-1

The U.S. Justice Department is visiting the jail this week for the first time since the federal government launched an investigation into the fatal beating of inmate Jessie Lee Williams Jr. by a jailer in 2006. The jail has been under a federal court order to make improvements since 1995. He also said county supervisors have supported changes such as pay raises and increased training for corrections officers.

"When I became sheriff, a jailer started out at \$22,000 a year. It wasn't enough to get the caliber of people we needed. The starting pay now is \$30,000 a year."

Brisolara said additional training gives the officers the tools they need and the pay increase encourages them to stay.

"They've had more training in the past year than was offered in the last decade," Brisolara said.

The sheriff also hired an information technology staff to deal with electronic record-keeping and related work. In April, he decided to pull out of the \$19 million Mississippi Automated System Project, touted seven years ago as a state-of-the-art database system that would tie in to a similar database for use by prosecutors.

GULFPORT — A maximum-security jail is no place for misdemeanor defendants, Sheriff Melvin Brisolara said Wednesday, recommending a restitution center to help ease overcrowding at the Harrison County Adult Detention Center.

Brisolara pitched the idea as he told the Sun Herald of accomplishments and continued problems at the jail during his first year in office.

The jail, built to house 760 inmates, held 956 inmates Wednesday. Misdemeanor defendants are housed in temporary buildings erected in 2008 and a project has been started to replace broken cell-door locks and other security problems. About 80 percent of the locks were broken when Brisolara was sworn in as sheriff.

There are plans to replace the leaking roof and malfunctioning heating and cooling system. The sheriff also plans to install lights and a security system around the jail perimeter to help deter escapes.

For now, overcrowding is one of his major concerns.

"Harrison County has created a monster," Brisolara said, "and it can't continue this way."

"Nobody is gaining a thing by putting misdemeanor offenders in jail and it's labor intensive to house them. Public drunks and people that owe traffic fines don't need to be locked up with violent offenders. How can they keep a job or pay their fines if they're locked up?"

Future plans include pushing for approval to build a 500-bed facility to add more space, "but we've got to fix up what we've got before we can move forward," said Brisolara.

Brisolara said the sheriff's old work center could easily be converted to a

"Public drunks and people that owe traffic fines don't need to be locked up with violent offenders. How can they keep a job or pay their fines if they're locked up?"

Melvin Brisolara,
Harrison County sheriff

restitution center for about 150 people in a more economical, dormitory-style setting.

"You let them out to go to work in the morning and they come back in at night," he said.

He also issued a challenge to Circuit Court judges to help minimize the stays of state inmates who are

The C Block at the Harrison County jail is currently being refitted with sliding cell doors for safety and security issues.

frequently brought back to the county jail for hearings in their cases.

"Justice Court judges have worked very hard to help us move people in and out of jail faster," Brisolara said. "We need the space available for the bad-a- criminals who need to be locked up."

About 10 to 15 percent of inmates at the jail are nonviolent offenders who could benefit from a restitution center while working to pay off their fines and housing costs, Brisolara said. That could free up 100 to 150 beds.

Warden Don Cabana, hired before Brisolara took office, began noticing problems and possible solutions that are now being put into place, the sheriff said.

Please see Jail, A-7



Text Size:

Tuesday, Mar 10, 2009

Posted on Wed, Aug. 15, 2007

Tape shows Gaston knew Al-Khidir after he denies it

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

After attorneys for James Ricky "Rick" Gaston rested their case, the federal government this afternoon offered a rebuttal with incriminating evidence against him.

While Gaston was on the witness stand, he testified that he was not aware that inmate Only Al-Khidir had been abused and did not see a picture of him that numerous officers said they viewed on a computer at the jail and on pictures posted around the booking area.

The government put Special Agent Joel Wallace, of the Mississippi Bureau of Investigations, on the witness stand and he narrated a videotaped recording and identified two different people who visited with the sheet-covered inmate afterward.

Wallace said the two are Capt. Steve Campbell, who ran the professional standards unit, and Gaston, who was captain over the booking room. U.S. District Judge Louis Guirola Jr. meets this evening with the attorneys to discuss jury instructions. The judge will go over instructions with the attorneys in open court Thursday at 9 a.m.

The jury was dismissed for the evening and was told to return at 10 a.m. The trial has been under way since Aug. 6. Teel and Gaston are accused of conspiring to deprive inmates rights through unnecessary force and coverups.

The Sun Herald is in Hattiesburg covering the trial. Check sunherald.com for updates on the trial and in Thursday's print editions for full coverage.



Text Size: ● ●

Thursday, Mar 12, 2009

Posted on Fri, Aug. 10, 2007

COURT SEES TAPE OF FATAL BEATING

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

The silent drama of the videotaped fatal beating of inmate Jessie Lee Williams Jr. played out for the first time in public view in a federal courtroom Thursday.

Raised eyebrows and a few soft gasps formed the backdrop for the somber occasion - the trial of two former Harrison County jailers, including the one accused of torturous acts resulting in Williams' death. Prosecutors showed the tape on the third day of trial for former Harrison County Sheriff's Sgt. Ryan Michael Teel and his supervisor at the time, Capt. James Ricky "Rick" Gaston. U.S. District Judge Louis Guirola has kept the tape under seal and said Thursday it will remain so until the trial has ended.

The tape answered some questions lingering since the incident Feb. 4, 2006. It clearly shows Williams - with hands cuffed behind his back while waiting to be booked in at a counter - leaning back to dodge an obvious kick from an officer identified by witnesses as former Sheriff's Sgt. Teel. And that was only the beginning.

Williams lunged at Teel after the kick, and a series of assaults followed while Williams remained cuffed and, according to witnesses, no threat to anyone.

Williams was kicked, punched, shot with a Taser, hog-tied, carried like a suitcase and dropped head first. The punching continued as he was strapped to a restraint chair and pepper-spray was spewed in his face through a spit mask.

In the courtroom, Teel, his cheeks turning red at times, whispered to his attorney occasionally and took notes as the tape was played.

The family of Williams, the father of six, had not been allowed to view the video until it was played in court. Terry Williams, Jessie Williams' brother, watched the tape with a pained expression on his face while his wife, Annette, patted his back and wept.

"The tape shows exactly what we believed it would," said Michael W. Crosby, attorney for Williams' estate. "It was inhumane, barbaric and surrealistic, representing mankind at its worst."

Several people who didn't know Williams or his family have attended the trial this week and given their moral support. Andrea Gibbs, a former sheriff's deputy who blew the whistle on inmate abuse at the Harrison County jail more than a decade ago, leaned over and whispered to Terry Williams after the tape played.

"I'm so sorry," Gibbs told him.

Five current or former law enforcement officers who witnessed the Williams incident testified Thursday afternoon. They said they were shocked or overwhelmed and all agreed they did nothing to stop it, nor did they contact authorities. Their reasons varied.

"I didn't want to be the one to drive that nail home," said Long Beach Police Officer Jason Case, who identified himself as a good friend of Teel. Case

and the other law enforcement officers were at the jail to drop off detainees at the jail booking room.

The jury heard its first perspective of the video from Jeremy Powell, a Gulfport High student who was 14 the night he visited the jail for a school project.

"I thought it was disgusting," said Powell.

Prosecutors presented as evidence the restraint chair Williams was placed in. Former jailer Leo DeGeorge, who witnessed part of the incident, demonstrated how the chair works.

"I was surprised by what I saw," DeGeorge said.

Several witnesses, including the teenager, told the court they heard Teel tell Williams, "I'm going to kill you."

Prosecutors set the stage for the video with the testimony of former Sheriff's Capt. Rupert Lacy, who had taught Teel, Gaston and others to use pepper spray. He'd also trained officers to use a Taser. Lacy said the devices are tools to help officers bring unruly detainees into compliance for the safety of all around them, but they're not intended "for play" or punishment or for use on anyone who is restrained and no threat to others. Also Thursday, jurors viewed a videotape showing inmate Kasey Alves, who testified he suffered acute kidney failure after Teel strapped him tightly in a restraint chair for more than seven hours. His incident occurred Jan. 7, 2006.

After Alves' incident, former jailer Madeline Dedeaux told the Sun Herald she warned the jail warden someone was going to die if somebody didn't do something about Teel.

Testimony in the conspiracy trial resumes today at 9 a.m. and is expected to last at least another week.

ON THE WEB

Text Size

Thursday, Aug 12, 2008

Posted on Thu Aug 08 2007

Videotape of second inmate assault shown at jail trial

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

A wide-eyed, somber audience in federal court viewed a second videotaped inmate assault this afternoon shortly after prosecutors played the recorded fatal beating of Jessie Lee Williams Jr.

The second tape showed the assault of Kasey Dion Alves, who told the court he suffered acute kidney failure after an incident at the Harrison County jail in Gulfport on Jan. 7, 2006. Alves said he was punched, pepper-sprayed and strapped tightly in a restraint chair for about seven hours.

Biloxi Police Officer Kit Manning, who also testified, said Alves was "extremely intoxicated" at the time of his arrest but wasn't a threat to anyone even after they were in the jail booking room. Manning said he put Alves against the wall and told him to stay there and turned but noticed Alves walking toward him. Manning said he pushed Alves against the acrylic glass window and again told him to wait for a booking officer.

The videotape shows an officer identified as Ryan Michael Teel shove Alves against the glass and both wound up on the floor, with Alves belly-down and Teel on top of him.

At the time, Alves was in two sets of handcuffs, a procedure Manning said is typical in the transfer of a detainee to another agency.

The tape shows that Teel wound a pillow case or sheet around Alves' head. Manning said it was tight enough to see Alves' facial features and he could see blood seeping through the cloth. Manning said Alves was pepper-

sprayed and recalled hearing Alves say he couldn't breathe. Manning said the pepper spray on the cuts on his face undoubtedly increased Alves' pain and discomfort.

The tape showed officers wrapping Alves in a blanket Manning called "a mummy wrap."

"I was surprised," said Manning, adding that officers in the booking room acted as if "it was something they were used to."

The tape showed Alves strapped in a restraint chair and rolled into a holding cell with other detainees. Gasps could be heard across the courtroom as the tape showed Teel slam a different inmate against a door jam and then slammed him again.

Alves told the court that former Sgt. Regina Rhodes also was involved and said he was punched in the mouth. Alves said he remembered gasping for breath and watching officers walking by laughing at him and making sarcastic remarks.

The tape showed Teel bouncing a ball against the window while Alves remained restrained.

In testimony earlier this morning, former Sheriff's Capt. Rupert Lacy told jurors how he trained Teel and former Capt. James Ricky "Rick" Gaston in the proper use of pepper spray. Lacy also testified on the proper use of a

Taser and said both are tools for officers to use to bring unruly prisoners into compliance.

In response to prosecutor Lisa Krigsten's questions, Lacy said it would not be appropriate to use either tool on a restrained inmate who posed no threat to others. He also said officers were advised in training and through polices and procedures that using them for punishment or "play" could cost them their job.

When the jury was sent home for the night, Gaston's attorney again asked U.S. District Judge Louis Guirola Jr. to try his client separately, citing damaging testimony against Teel. Guirola again denied his request.

The Sun Herald is in Hattiesburg covering the trial and updates this story online and in Thursday's editions.



Text Size:

Thursday, Mar 12, 2006

Posted on Thu Aug 09 2007

Williams jail beating video played in court

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

All eyes focused on monitors in the courtroom of U.S. District Judge Louis Guirola Jr. of the videotaped beating of Jessie Lee Williams Jr. played before a noon break in the trial of two Harrison County jailers.

Jeremy Powell, a Gulfport High School student who was 14 when he visited the jail Feb. 4, 2006 for a school project, recounted what he saw and heard as federal prosecutor John Cotton Richmond played the tape and stopped it numerous times to ask questions.

Powell identified Ryan Michael Teel as the one who delivered most of the blows and Regina Rhodes as the other officer who also punched Williams. Movement in the videotape is choppy, but it shows Williams entering the booking room at 10:30 p.m. in a white T-shirt with his hands cuffed behind him.

At 10:32 p.m., the tape shows Rhodes pushing him against the wall. Powell said it was because Williams failed to comply with an order to remain standing against the wall. The tape shows Williams moving away from Teel as Teel's right leg drew back and then kicked him. Williams lunged at Teel and both fell on the floor, with Williams hitting his head against the wall.

The tape shows Williams was punched repeatedly in the head, back and chest by Teel, hogtied, punched some more and dropped headfirst before he was wrapped in a black blanket.

The punching continued even as Williams was strapped to a restraint chair. The tape shows Williams legs moving and Teel shoving the chair back against the wall.

Prior to being placed in the chair, a woman identified as Gulfport Police Officer Kelly Knight handed Teel a can of pepper spray, which was sprayed in his face through a spit mask that had been placed over his head. While Williams was restrained in the chair, Teel poured water over his face. According to Powell, Teel said, "I hope you don't drown." It appeared the water was an effort to decontaminate Williams from the burning sensation of the pepper spray.

Within an hour, an ambulance crew arrived to take him to the hospital, where he died when he was removed from life support two days later on Feb. 6, 2006. Teel conferred with his attorney as the tape played.

Terry Williams, Jessie Williams' brother, looked on with a pained expression as his wife, Annette, patted his back.

The Sun Herald is in Hattiesburg to cover the trial and gives updates online and in Friday's edition.

Text Size

Thursday, March 12, 2006

Posted on Wed Aug 09, 2006

'Culture of abuse' recounted

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

Graphic testimony in the trial of two former Harrison County jailers Tuesday matched a federal prosecutor's description of a "culture of violence" among officers who "sullied their badges by bad decisions," making the abuse of inmates a sport.

Jurors in the trial of James Ricky "Rick" Gaston and Ryan Michael Teel appeared overwhelmed by claims and evidence including a picture of an injured inmate and surveillance recordings of a female inmate's assault. In testimony punctuated by objections from defense attorneys, former jailer William Jeffery Priest identified Teel and Gaston as ringleaders of a rogue pack that encouraged beating inmates, joked about it and taught others how to strike an inmate without leaving a visible mark.

Priest told jurors of several abused inmates, including Only Al-Khidir, whose booking mug shows a bloody face and hair askew. Former jailer Morgan Thompson told Priest he beat the man in the shower room, where no surveillance cameras are present, according to Priest.

Numerous jailers and deputies were shown the picture on a jail computer and half a dozen copies were posted around the jail, "almost as a joke," Priest said. Gaston was present that day and made no efforts to stop the show-and-tell, according to Priest. Former jailer Timothy Moore, who quit after the incident, has admitted he falsified a report on the incident at the request of Gaston and an unidentified co-conspirator. The jail docket shows Al-Khidir was booked in the night of Oct. 4, 2005.

Jurors also heard from two former Baldwin County, Ala., corrections officers who said they were prepared to bust out of the Harrison County jail gate to escape with a prisoner assaulted by Gaston, then a captain at the jail, on Oct. 10, 2003. The officers said they had orders to move a Harrison County jail inmate to their jail. One, a senior officer, said he ordered his companion to pepper spray Gaston and was trying to retrieve his gun, which he left in their van, when they were able to fend him off.

Testimony resumes today at 9 a.m. before U.S. District Judge Louis Guirola Jr.

Federal trial attorney Lisa Krigsten, in opening statements Tuesday, described Gaston as "priding himself in ruthlessly abusing inmates who angered him. He led the charge."

Teel, she said, "set the tone for the rest of the officers, encouraging a culture of abuse. He abused for sport."

Krigsten told jurors the case isn't about the fatal beating of inmate Jessie Lee Williams Jr., an inmate who died after an assault in the jail booking room on Feb. 4, 2006.

Williams, she said, just happened to be the one who died of his injuries. Krigsten said witnesses will testify that Williams was punched, kicked, shot with a Taser, pepper sprayed and died of bleeding of the brain after the veins surrounding his brain were broken. The government plans to play the

surveillance tapes of the incident before it rests its case.

Jailers who participated in the conspiracy exploited the power of their badges and preyed on the weak and vulnerable until their acts "extinguished the light of a life," Krigsten said.

Priest is among eight former jailers who accepted plea bargains to testify for the prosecution. During about two hours of testimony Tuesday, Priest said Teel took delight in abusing inmates and acted "giddy" and "excited" when he became the first officer to use a Taser.

Teel had names for each day of the week, such as "Thump A Thug Thursday," Priest said.

He also said Teel taught other officers the "red light-green light" method of assaulting inmates, considering "red" the face area, and "green" anywhere on the body where a mark wouldn't be easily visible.

According to Priest, Steve Campbell, who ran the Sheriff's Department's internal affairs office, helped officers conceal the abuse. Campbell has not been charged in the case, but is listed as a potential witness.

Patrick Craft and Ronnie Partain, the former Alabama jailers, said Gaston twice assaulted inmate Timothy Oliver and followed them to their transport van, where Gaston allegedly crawled in the van to strike the handcuffed inmate again. Both men said Gaston initiated the incident after Oliver spat at him while they "bickered back and forth."

Defense attorneys raised numerous objections throughout the afternoon. Opening arguments were delayed until after lunch. Guirola said a juror's child was involved in a traffic accident while traveling to school. Guirola dismissed the juror.

Attorney Jim Davis, representing Teel, said his client only used the amount of force necessary to control inmates. The only reason charges were filed, said Davis, is that investigators found "a weak link" in former jailer Regina Rhodes and convinced her "to set up" other officers. Rhodes was the first to enter a plea agreement with the government, admitting she conspired to deprive inmates' rights under color of law.

Omodare Jupiter, part of the public defender team representing Gaston, also said his client is innocent and was only doing what he needed to do to ensure the safety of officers and inmates.

Jupiter said the jail is overcrowded, understaffed and "there is no clear chain of command."

Text Size

Thursday, Mar 12, 2008

Posted on Wed Aug 06, 2007

Jailer details alleged abuse on female inmate at Harrison County jail

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

Chelle Abrams, "loud and boisterous" by nature, yelled and threw a food tray in her holding cell because she had been pepper sprayed at the Harrison County jail without being decontaminated, according to a former jailer's testimony today.

Abrams flushed her eyes with water from a stainless steel toilet and booking officers ignored her screams for help, said former jailer William Jeffery Priest. In a span of 10 minutes filmed by surveillance cameras, Abrams was punched in the face repeatedly by Ryan Michael Teel after she threw toilet water at him as officers entered her cell, Priest testified. The other co-defendant, James Ricky "Rick" Gaston, then repeatedly shot Abrams with a Taser, said Priest, who admitted he then punched her, and she said, "I'm done."

In other testimony today, former jail employee Melissa Peterson said she witnessed her friend, Regina Rhodes, straddling Abra Horn in a female cell and punching her in the back. Peterson said she, along with Rhodes, Gaston and another officer, escorted Horn to a holding cell and on the way Horn spat at Rhodes and tried to kick her. Rhodes punched Horn while Gaston watched and remained silent, Peterson testified.

The government called another witness after a lunch break. Former jailer Dedri Caldwell, one of the eight to plead guilty in the investigation, is at the federal courthouse with her attorney and likely could be the next witness called.

The Sun Herald is in Hattiesburg covering the trial and brings updates online and in Thursday's editions.



Text Size:

Thursday, Mar 12, 2009

Posted on Tue, Aug. 07, 2007

Jurors appeared overwhelmed by jail trial testimony

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

Jurors appeared overwhelmed today by testimony regarding a beaten inmate's picture, a recording of an assault on a female inmate and other accounts of abuse by officers at the Harrison County jail. Evidence presented by federal prosecutors was punctuated by objections from attorneys defending former Harrison County jailers Ryan Teel and Rick Gaston. Testifying for nearly two hours, former jailer William Jeffery Priest responded to questions with graphic details of unnecessary force and bragging, not only by Teel and Gaston, but by other officers as well as himself.

Priest's testimony followed that of two former Baldwin County jailers who said they were prepared to bust out of the Harrison County jail gate to escape with a prisoner assaulted by Gaston, then a captain at the jail. Teel was not involved in that particular incident, according to testimony.

Opening statements began with the government providing fiery accusations of a world of torture at the jail where the government alleges that Teel and Gaston encouraged the abuse of inmates during a period of several years. In the case involving testimony from Alabama officers, Gaston allegedly assaulted the inmate twice while the deputies were trying to take him out of the jail to move him to Baldwin County on Oct. 10, 2003.

Teel and Gaston are accused of a conspiracy to deprive inmates' rights with excessive, unjustified force and acts to conceal the crimes. They also are charged with individual counts alleging they abused separate inmates at the Harrison County jail in Gulfport.

Teel's charges include the fatal beating of inmate Jessie Lee Williams Jr., whose adult family members are attending the trial. Williams is the only alleged victim identified by name in the indictment. Harrison County Coroner Gary Hargrove ruled Williams' death on Feb. 6, 2006, a homicide at the hands of another at the Harrison County jail.

The prosecutors are federal trial attorneys Lisa Krigsten and John Cotton Richmond, both from the U.S. Justice Department civil rights division in Washington. Also seated at the prosecution table are Special Agent Joel Wallace of the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation and Ruth Morgan, an assistant U.S. attorney from the Southern District of Mississippi.

Teel, 30, a former sergeant at the jail booking room, is represented by Gulfport attorney Jim Davis.

Gaston, 52, a former captain and the highest-ranking officer accused criminally, is represented by a team of federal public defenders led by John Weber.

If convicted on all counts, Teel and Gaston each face possible penalties that include life in prison.

The Sun Herald is in Hattiesburg to cover the trial and provide updates online and in Wednesday's editions.

Text Size:

Thursday, Mar 12 2009

Posted on Fri, Aug 10, 2007

Jurors off for weekend after testimony from Regina Rhodes

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

A federal judge released jurors for the weekend after an intense day of testimony ending with a detailed account of the fatal, jailhouse beating of inmate Jessie Lee Williams Jr.

The last to take the witness stand today in the criminal civil- rights case was former Harrison County booking officer Regina Lynn Rhodes, a witness for the prosecution. Rhodes, 30, was the first of eight former jailers to enter plea bargains with the government after an investigation prompted by Williams' death.

Rhodes said Williams tried to choke her supervisor at one point in the beating, but claimed that Williams was no threat to anyone when the assault began and throughout the incident, with exception of the choking attempt. Rhodes said she and Ryan Michael Teel, officer in charge, bickered with Williams before the commotion began. Rhodes admitted to the punches she threw, but told of numerous strikes by Teel.

Rhodes' testimony accompanied the playing of a videotape from a different camera angle, revealing new information backed up by Rhodes' first-hand account of Williams' assault on Feb. 4, 2006. Teel is on trial along with their former boss, then-Capt. James Ricky "Rick" Gaston.

While several former jailers who witnessed the Williams beating have now testified to what they saw, Rhodes is the first jailer involved in that incident to bring every detail into focus, including a new detail the Williams' family had not heard. The different camera angle makes it appear that Williams didn't lunge at Teel after Teel landed a swift kick to Williams' chest or stomach area. Instead, it appears that Williams fell over, Teel grabbed him and they began to tussle.

Rhodes described how Williams was repeatedly kicked, punched, stunned by a Taser, hog-tied, wrapped in a restraint blanket and further incapacitated by a spit mask doused with pepper spray and placed over his face. After Williams was strapped to the restraint chair, Teel "knead him in the groin" and choked him with a leather strap placed across his neck, Rhodes said.

After the Taser was used, Rhodes said, Teel pulled the fish-hook-shaped prongs out of Williams' flesh and jabbed them back into his skin.

Several of Williams' relatives began to weep.

In other testimony this afternoon, Sheriff's Department patrol officer William Correa said he witnessed part of the Williams incident, leaving an inner office to watch parts of the commotion while doing paperwork.

Read more about this story in Saturday's editions of the Sun Herald.

Thursday, Mar 12, 2008

Posted on Sat, Aug 11, 2007

Former jailer recalls beating

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

Jessie Lee Williams Jr. did not lunge at the Harrison County jail booking officer who kicked him, but raised his arm to fend off the blow and fell over, according to testimony from former members of the booking-room "brotherhood" and a different camera angle of the videotaped fatal beating. In an intense day of testimony in federal court Friday, witnesses including former jailer Regina Lynn Rhodes revealed new information the federal government plans to use to prove its conspiracy case of jailhouse abuse. The accusations are civil rights violations, a federal crime, involving unjustified force that injured inmates and resulted in Williams' death. On trial are Ryan Michael Teel, a former officer in charge of the booking room, and James Ricky "Rick" Gaston, former captain in charge of booking and inmate records. Eight former jailers, including Rhodes, have pleaded guilty to related charges.

U.S. District Court Judge Louis Guirola Jr. is presiding.

The officers who conspired to deprive inmates' rights under color of law were an "extremely tight" group who taunted, threatened and intentionally injured inmates regardless of whether they were restrained and or a threat to anyone, Rhodes testified.

And that, she said, included Williams.

The videotaped beating of Williams was made public at trial this week; but a recording shown Friday came from a different camera. Both show Williams with hands cuffed behind his back and, according to testimony, complying with Teel's order to remove his shoes. They also show Teel with one leg thrust back for a forceful kick that struck Williams' chest or stomach.

But in the second recording, it appears Williams tried to deflect the blow and fell over, with Teel grabbing him and the two beginning to tussle. The first tape raised questions that Williams lunged at Teel in response to the punt-style kick.

Deputy Sheriff William Correa, a patrolman who was in the booking area, said Williams was no threat to anyone and was trying to deflect the kick that began the melee.

Correa said he later overheard Teel, Rhodes and then-officer Morgan Thompson working on their use-of-force narrative report. Correa said he overheard Teel say, "We have to write this up the right way." Correa said he believed that meant to write the report in their favor, falsely.

Rhodes told the court she taunted Williams and that she and Teel bickered with Williams with a string of profanity before and after the series of assaults began. She also echoed other witnesses who said Teel threatened several times to kill Williams.

Rhodes testified that Teel repeatedly kicked, punched and Tasered Williams, hog-tied him, wrapped him in a restraint blanket and further incapacitated him by a spit mask doused with pepper spray and placed

over his face. After Williams was strapped to the restraint chair, Teel "kneaded him in the groin" and choked him with a leather strap placed across his neck, Rhodes said.

In a new detail, Rhodes said Teel pulled the fish-hook-shaped prongs from the Taser out of Williams' flesh and jabbed them back into his skin.

Several of Williams' relatives began to weep during Rhodes' testimony. "My Lord," whispered Williams' aunt, Zola Broach.

Rhodes said she also punched Williams several times. She said she was angry that Williams tried to choke Teel during a struggle, but said that was the only point that Williams was considered non-compliant.

Rhodes described one instance in which Teel kicked Williams in the head as he lay restrained and wrapped on the floor.

"I said, 'Damn, that looked like it hurt.' I was still angry but it looked painful," said Rhodes.

The assault began at about 10:30 p.m. on Feb. 4, 2006. Dr. James Doty, a neurosurgeon, testified Friday that Williams effectively was dead when he saw him at the hospital about 2:50 a.m. the next day.

Doty said Williams had blunt-force trauma of the facial area and a blood clot - a subdural hematoma - that spread through the right side of his brain. His brain was realigned by at least three-quarters of an inch.

"His was one of the most severe subdural hematomas I've actually evaluated in my years," said Doty, who has been practicing for 20 years.

In other testimony, Vicky Burns Trimble, a former officer in charge of booking, said she couldn't stop the officers under her from abusing inmates and said she had complained "at least 10 times" to Gaston, "but nothing changed."

Rhodes returns to the witness stand at 9 a.m. Monday.

Federal trial attorney John Richmond said the government expects to rest its case sometime Monday.

ON THE WEB



Text Size:

Thursday, Mar 12, 2009

Posted on Mon, Aug. 13, 2007

Former jailer: Gaston knew about abuse and didn't stop it

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

Former Harrison County jailer Morgan Lee Thompson today testified that the captain in charge of booking knew that officers were abusing inmates and did nothing to stop it. He was referring to James Ricky "Rick" Gaston who is on trial in federal court along with Ryan Michael Teel in a jailhouse abuse case.

Thompson said Capt. Steve Campbell, who was in charge of professional standards, was given some reports of inmate incidents but Campbell never spoke to him about those incidents.

Thompson's testimony came after Regina Rhodes, another former booking officer, gave incriminating testimony against Teel and Gaston.

Rhodes and Thompson both admitted using excessive force and implicated other officers; Thompson even said patrol officers would abuse inmates.

The Sun Herald posts continuous updates from Hattiesburg throughout the day at sunherald.com, with full roundups in the next day's paper.



Text Size:

Thursday, Mar 12, 2009

Posted on Mon, Aug. 13, 2007

Feds expect to rest Monday

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

The conspiracy trial of two former Harrison County jailers so far has included startling testimony of officers' taunts and torture of inmates, long-term cover-ups and videotapes of an inmate being beaten to death.

The federal government, with mounds of evidence amassed in an 18-month investigation, laid the foundation for its case in the first week of trial, which recessed Friday in Hattiesburg. Prosecutors expect to rest their case after testimony Monday. Defense attorneys will attempt to convince jurors their clients are not guilty of crimes that could put both defendants behind bars for life. The trial could end this week.

Current and former jailers and law enforcement officers last week testified for the prosecution of Ryan Michael Teel, 30, and James Ricky "Rick" Gaston, 52. Teel was the officer in charge of the booking room on Feb. 4, 2006, the night inmate Jessie Lee Williams Jr. was beaten to death. Gaston was the captain over booking and inmate records.

According to prosecutors and witnesses, Teel helped set the tone for making inmate abuse a sport at the jail. Gaston, they said, ran the booking division with its own set of rules and was known to say that booking was "kicking ass and not taking names."

Teel and Gaston are accused of conspiracy and two counts each involving specific inmate assaults, one including the same inmate. Teel's charges include the assault leading to Williams' death and falsifying his report.

Regina Rhodes, the first of eight former jailers to break a code of silence with a confession, gave frank, damaging testimony Friday against Teel, Gaston and others. She admitted taunting and punching Williams and said she and Teel swapped threats and curse words with Williams before Teel initiated the attack. She gave a detailed narration of videotapes from different cameras around the booking area.

According to Rhodes, co-conspirators bragged about assaulting inmates and Gaston reminded them to avoid being caught on camera if they "had to do something." It wasn't uncommon, she said, for officers to pepper-spray door handles and toilet seats for the fun of watching inmates experience the painful burning sensation.

Rhodes and others who testified said officers had names for each day of the week: Thump A Thug Thursday. Friday Night Fights. Slap A Ho Saturday.

Rhodes recalled taunting Williams by telling him, "If you're feeling froggy, jump."

"I told him he should listen to that white boy (Teel) or he's going to hit him." According to testimony, handcuffs were removed from Williams and he was complying with an order to remove his shoes when Teel gave him a forceful kick. A struggle ensued, and Williams was again cuffed with hands behind his back. The tapes recorded an image without sound every two or three seconds. They show an officer, identified in court as Teel, launching a

series of assaults with closed fists, feet and a variety of devices.

Rhodes, 30, told the court Williams was not a threat to anyone when the attack began or at any time other than when he attempted to choke Teel after Teel had him on the floor.

Rhodes said inmates who witnessed it cried out for Teel to stop because Williams was complying with orders. She described Williams' screams of pain as he was shocked by a Taser, hog-tied, dropped head first, then strapped to a restraint chair as blows continued. Rhodes said Teel doused a spit mask with pepper spray and placed over Williams' face while the inmate was restrained.

Teel also removed the fish-hook prongs from the Taser and jabbed them into Williams' flesh, Rhodes said, and choked him with a leather strap while Williams was in the restraint chair.

Dr. James Doty, the neurosurgeon who evaluated Williams, testified that he suffered from blunt-force trauma to the facial area and a subdural hematoma, a blood clot on the brain. Doty said it was one of the worst cases of subdural hematomas he's seen in 20 years.

For Williams' family, the trial is about justice for the 40-year-old father of six. But federal trial attorneys in opening statements said the trial isn't about Williams. He just happened to be the inmate who died at the hands of officers who betrayed the trust of their badges, said Lisa Krigsten.

Krigsten and John Cotton Richmond lead the prosecution. Both are attorneys from the Justice Department's Civil-Rights Division in Washington.

Also at the prosecution table is special agent Joel Wallace of the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation, the lead investigator in the case.

Records show his agency began interrogations Feb. 8, 2006, the day Harrison County Coroner Gary Hargrove ruled Williams' death a homicide.

On the defense side, attorney Jim Davis of Gulfport is the court-appointed counsel for Teel, whose wife attended court daily last week and wept as the videotapes were played. His parents heard a couple of days' testimony.

Gaston is represented by a team of five federal public defenders led by attorneys John Weber and Omodare Jupiter. Gaston's daughter and a son, dressed in military uniform, also attended the first week of trial.

Testimony resumes at 9 a.m. Monday with the cross-examination of Rhodes. U.S. District Court Judge Louis Guirola Jr. is presiding.

Week One in review

Highlights, by day, of testimony in the trial of former Harrison County jailers Ryan Michael Teel and James Ricky "Rick" Gaston:**Monday**

An all-white jury is selected

Tuesday

Former Baldwin County, Ala., jailers testify they were prepared to break through the jail gate to help a prisoner they were picking up who had been assaulted by Gaston.

Wednesday

Former jailers testify that inmates were regularly beaten. Sheriff's Capt. Kenny Rogers testifies on how jailers were trained to control inmates.

Thursday

Prosecutors show a graphic video of Williams being beaten and tortured.

Friday

Former jailer Regina Rhodes tells how jailers joked about assaulting inmates in areas where cameras couldn't see them.



Text Size:

Thursday, Mar 12, 2009

Posted on Mon, Aug. 13, 2007

Teel defense starts in jail trial

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

Testimony this afternoon in the defense of former jailer Ryan Michael Teel brought no startling revelations about abuse of inmates by him at the Harrison County jail.

Four former sheriff's department employees testified that they never saw inmate abuse or saw Teel abuse inmates. However, as federal prosecutor Lisa Krigsten pointed out in questioning all four were aware of inmate abuse and told state investigators so in previous interviews. One of them did not work in the jail for a period of three years so he had no way of knowing about Teel's actions in the jail anyway, Krigsten said.

The jury has been sent home for the evening. Testimony resumes at 9 a.m. Tuesday.

The Sun Herald posts updates on trial throughout the day on sunherald.com. Read full accounts daily in the print edition.



Text Size

Tuesday, Mar 30, 2009

Posted on Tue, Aug. 14, 2007

Teel testifies and rests case

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

The prosecution confronted Ryan Teel with conflicting testimony from a sworn statement today before he rested his case and defense began for his co-defendant.

The issue at hand involved one of Teel's motions to sever his case from co-defendant Rick Gaston in an affidavit unsealed in court during a break from Teel's testimony.

The affidavit was filed before the start of trial for the two former jailers and involved Teel's statements that he had witnessed "countless" incidents of inmate abuse at the jail and incidents involving Gaston, the former captain over booking.

Teel's attorney, Jim Davis, didn't want the document unsealed and told U.S. District Judge Louis Guirola Jr. his client hadn't lied yet on the witness stand and he wasn't going to lie in further testimony.

Gaston's lead attorney, John Weber, argued that it wasn't fair to present damaging testimony about Gaston that had not been provided in advance to his attorneys.

The judge ruled the document unsealed and said attorney's could make objections as they considered appropriate.

In response to questions from federal trial attorney John Cotton Richmond, Teel answered cautiously, admitting his unsealed statement said Gaston was aware of inmate abuse and also had used force on inmates.

Teel admitted the incident began when he kicked Williams, as shown on the videotapes played in court. Teel said he kicked because Williams refused to comply with an order to keep his hands on the booking counter. But Teel said the blow didn't land where he intended it to because he has an ankle problem from a prior injury.

Teel described the scenario that followed as this: Once Williams was re-cuffed with hands behind his back, Teel hog-tied him and used two different cans of pepper spray to douse a spit mask, rub it on Williams' face, then put the mask over Williams' head. Teel said he then spewed pepper spray up the mask toward Williams' nose and chin.

Teel said he used the pepper spray because Williams refused to give up one hand to be re-cuffed.

Teel claimed he warned Williams to give up his other hand for the cuffs, saying "I've got 50,000 reasons why you should do it."

Teel said he was referring to the 50,000 volts of electricity the Taser delivers when its prongs or the gun itself makes contact with skin.

Teel said he first used the Taser's air cartridge, which released lines with barb-tipped probes that pierced Williams skin, and then used a "drive stun," which means placing the Taser directly against the skin. Williams' family groaned quietly as Teel matter-of-factly described how he yanked the barb-ended prongs out of Williams' skin.

Teel said he then hog-tied Williams to further gain control of him and

carried him to a restraint chair brought out at Teel's order.

Once Williams was seated in the chair, Teel punched him two or three times in the stomach. Teel said he punched in reflex and anger after Williams kicked him three times in the groin.

Richmond asked Teel why he couldn't just step back to avoid Williams' legs and why felt it necessary to use those levels of force against a restrained inmate in violation of jail policies.

Teel said he feared for his life and jail policies have a provision that an officer can take extreme measures in extreme circumstances.

Teel said he was sorry for the family's loss, but maintained he did not feel responsible for Williams' death.

Attorney Michael W. Crosby, representing Williams' estate in a related civil case, said he felt Teel's comments and his statement to Williams' family was not genuine and was more of a legal defense maneuver.

Testimony resumes at 9 a.m. Wednesday with Gaston's defense.

The Sun Herald is in Hattiesburg to cover the trial and provides updates online and in Wednesday's editions.



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Tuesday, Mar 10, 2009

Posted on Wed, Aug. 19, 2007

Gaston denies all allegations in his testimony

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

Former Sheriff's Capt. Rick Gaston has taken the witness stand and denied all allegations that he abused inmates or encouraged those who worked under him to do the same.

Gaston said he was hired as chief of security because then-warden Maj. Diane Gatson-Riley "was just an office person." Gaston said that after 1-1/2 years as chief of security, he then began working with bail bonding companies but that only required an hour or two a week of his time in his position at the jail.

He was named booking supervisor in September 2004 and said he began to develop the booking officers to follow in his image as one who sees detainees as being regular people.

"The thing about booking is that it has a totally separate function from the rest of the jail," he said.

Gaston said that while jailers who work in the housing units are there to care for them and maintain safety, booking officers deal with people who are intoxicated, on drugs, sometimes are violent or have mental issues.

"Booking is where it all starts and all ends," he said.

Since Gaston's defense has not rested, the prosecutors have not had a chance to question those testifying in his favor.

Testimony resumes at 1:30 p.m.

The Sun Herald is in Hattiesburg covering the trial and provides updates throughout the day online and in Thursday's editions.



Thursday, Mar 5, 2009

Posted on Thu, Aug. 16, 2007

Gaston denies knowledge of abuse

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

Rick Gaston rested his case Wednesday in staunch denial of accusations that he knew the Harrison County jail booking officers under his supervision abused inmates.

The former sheriff's captain did not attempt to respond to the federal government's rebuttal, which used a video to contradict Gaston's testimony claiming he was unaware of the beating of inmate Only Al-Khidir. Gaston said he recently learned of the incident after a former jailer confessed to kicking the inmate in the face and another who witnessed the assault admitted changing his report, claiming Gaston told him to change it because his first report "wasn't false enough."

The video showed two people visiting the inmate's bedside after the assault. Special Agent Joel Wallace of the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation identified the visitors as Gaston and former Capt. Steve Campbell, who ran the sheriff's professional standards unit. Al-Khidir is the inmate whose booking picture, shown at trial, showed a bloody, swollen face and hair askew.

Gaston maintained his composure as he left the federal courthouse Wednesday. He and co-defendant Ryan Teel, a former officer in charge of the booking room, return to court at 10 a.m. today for closing arguments. U.S. District Judge Louis Guirola Jr. will then turn the case over to the jury. Gaston, 52, and Teel, 30, have maintained their innocence on a five-count indictment alleging they conspired with others, under color of law, to violate inmates' rights with intimidation and punishment through unnecessary, excessive force. Their indictments came after the beating death of inmate Jessie Lee Williams Jr. on Feb. 4, 2006, prompted a state investigation joined by the federal government.

Both defendants are accused on the conspiracy count. Teel, who testified Monday, is accused on three other counts that involve attempting to kill Williams, covering up the attempt with false reports and statements, and assaulting inmate Michelle "Chelle" Abrams with Gaston on Aug. 9, 2005. Gaston also is charged with the Oct. 10, 2003, assault of inmate Timothy Oliver. Former Baldwin County, Ala., corrections officers who went to the Harrison County jail in Gulfport to extradite Oliver testified at trial that Gaston assaulted the inmate and they were prepared to break through the back jail gate to escape with their prisoner when someone finally opened the gate to let them leave.

"Timothy Oliver had AIDS," Gaston said emphatically Wednesday, testifying he and Oliver fought after Oliver spat on him. Gaston also said the incident with Abrams began after she spat on him. Others testified Oliver and Abrams have a history of resisting arrest and fighting officers. Gaston described Abrams as a large, "unbalanced" woman who "can whip your ass" and was "extremely loud and disruptive" when taken into custody. Contrary to testimony from others, Gaston claimed the inmates were

combative and he used an appropriate level of force to bring them under control.

Federal trial attorneys Lisa Krigsten and John Cotton Richmond have said Teel set the tone for a pattern of abuse at the jail and Gaston "led the charge."

Krigsten called it "a culture of violence."

Gaston described his job as promoting "a culture of efficiency."

Gaston portrayed himself as a "hands-on" supervisor who worked "elbow to elbow" with booking officers while other jail supervisors sat in offices reviewing reports. He said he loved his job and tried to teach the young officers the most efficient ways to handle their jobs safely so he could retire one day and leave booking in their hands.

"I told them to remember that everybody who comes to jail is not a bad person," Gaston said.

Lead defense attorney John Weber questioned Gaston on accusations Gaston also abused inmates and encouraged booking officers to conceal inmate abuse by not striking inmates in front of surveillance cameras. Gaston said he was the one who helped place the cameras in the booking area and he often reminded officers their actions could be recorded at any time.

Gaston blamed problems at the jail on internal strife and a lack of leadership. He refuted one former officer's claim she had complained to Gaston of abuse "10-plus times," to no avail.

Gaston said he didn't always receive use-of-force reports and officers' narratives. He accused then-warden Maj. Diane Gatson-Riley of hoarding reports he'd never seen and pulling them out at a meeting "to make me look bad."

~~Gaston, a warden at the jail during a 10-year stint ending in 1995, said~~

Sheriff George H. Payne Jr. rehired him in 2000 because Gatson-Riley was just an office person and was unable to prevent escapes.

Prosecutors said Gaston helped set policies and mentioned a meeting on April 20, 2005, in which senior jail officials warned booking officers to stop mistreating inmates. Prosecutors said Gaston should have known then of abuse complaints.

Gaston said he wasn't allowed to speak at the meeting and assumed the sheriff's professional standards unit would handle any incidents involving abuse complaints.

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Tuesday, Mar 3, 2009

Posted on Mon, Jan. 14, 2008

Former jailers begin prison time

By ROBIN FITZGERALD

Eight former jailers must report to a federal prison today on guilty pleas to conspiring to deprive the civil rights of inmates.

Their penalties range from 18 months to four years. One jailer, who quit his job in disgust, received no prison time. The former officers were sentenced Nov. 5 and 6 before U.S. District Judge Louis Guirola Jr.

Each must report to a designated federal prison by noon today. Most of them faced up to 10 years behind bars. In the end, the judge followed federal prosecutors' recommendations for leniency for cooperating with the investigation.

Another ex-jailer, Ryan Teel, began serving time last month at a federal prison in Atlanta. He was convicted on charges including the murder of inmate Jessie Lee Williams Jr. in February 2006.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons advises against making inmates' designated location public until they've reached their destination safely.

A law enforcement background is one of the factors the prison system considers when deciding where to place an inmate, said Felicia Ponce of the bureau's public affairs office in Washington.

The Bureau of Prisons tries to place inmates within 500 miles of their home to maintain family and community ties, said Ponce, "but sometimes that can't happen."

"If at any time they feel they are unsafe in the general population, steps are taken to place them in the special housing unit," Ponce said.

The penalties

The 10 ex-jailers sentenced in a conspiracy to deprive inmates' rights under color of law will be on probation after serving their time.

The former officers and the time to serve:

Ryan Teel: Two life prison sentences plus 20 years for convictions including the murder of detainee Jessie Lee Williams Jr.

Regina Rhodes: 18 months as the first to plead guilty on accusations including her role in the fatal inmate beating.

Morgan Thompson: 48 months, helped restrain Williams' for an unjustified beating.

Preston Wills: 41 months.

Daniel Evans: 36 months.

Brodrick Fulton: 33 months.

Dedri Caldwell: 24 months.

Jeffrey Priest: 21 months.

Karle Stolze: 15 months.

Timothy Moore: 4 months of house arrest.